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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study of metalinguistic awareness in young children. Metalinguistic awareness refers to the child's ability to concentrate on the sounds and patterns of language rather than on its communicative aspects. Metalinguistic awareness was studied by analyzing the verbal play and verbal games of 149 children from 6 months to 10 years of age. Each sample of verbal play or games was coded to provide information on the child's age, sex, race, socioeconomic status (SES), presence of other persons, use of materials or equipment, activity being engaged in, behavior setting, and school achievement data. A sample was considered an example of verbal play if it incorporated an observable manipulation of the sound, semantics and/or syntax of the language. A sample was considered an example of a verbal game if, in addition to the verbal play aspects, it also involved some preconceived rules or guidelines which permitted the participation of other children in a consistent manner. Results indicated the following: play with sound preceded play with syntax; play with syntax involved repetitive sequences; word order conformed to standard English; and verbal play often incorporated rhyme, rhythm and alliteration. With increasing age, the presence of other children became increasingly important to the production of verbal play or games, verbal games tended to replace verbal play, and materials or equipment were more frequently incorporated into the verbal play or games. No consistent effects were found for sex, race, SES or school achievement. (BD)

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METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS -- A STUDY OF VERBAL PLAY IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested by Erikson (1963) that play is child's work. Play, a behavior shared with other species, functions to help the child make sense of the adult world, and come to terms with the rules of socialized behavior. He says, "The child's play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experiment and planning" (p. 222). Moreover, in play many special skills are first developed and practiced (Bruner, 1972). In Erikson's terminology, through play the child advances to new stages of mastery. The qualities which characterize play -- exploring, hypothesizing, testing, verifying, and practicing -- have all been observed in the language behavior of young children. It has been hypothesized, therefore, that verbal play functions to develop mastery over language. The child delights, as Wilkinson (1971) says, in practicing on its own the sound, syntax, and semantics of language by playing with these elements, by reshaping them, reviewing and, ultimately, refining them. Just as mastery of objective reality requires activity with objects, likewise, Elkonin (1971) contends, mastery of language requires activity with language.

The primary function of language is to communicate. In verbal play this function is forfeited. In its place the child substitutes a playful manipulation of verbal forms. The child concentrates on the language

itself and ignores, for the time being, meaningful communication. In a sense, language becomes opaque as it is attended to directly. The child concentrates on the sounds and patterns of the language and manipulates them. When communication is the objective, the language forms themselves are not immediately accessible; they are ignored, and language becomes transparent. Ordinarily, neither child nor adult attends directly to words or their patterns when communication is the goal. Metalinguistic awareness is defined by Cazden (1974) as the ability to make language forms opaque and attend to them in and for themselves. She speculates that language is more opaque to children than to adults. This would seem to be supported by the anecdotal accounts available of young children's verbal play.

Chukovsky (1963), a Russian author of children's books, declared that poetry is the natural language of childhood. He collected many samples of what he considered to be the linguistic genius of the child from two to five. These samples exemplified play with sound, grammatical pattern and meaning. Perhaps the most interesting of these were the "topsy-turvies" in which the child, through reversing the order of typical phenomena, manipulated meaning. The humor of incongruity suggested by topsie-turvies is appreciated by the young child such as Chukovsky's own little girl who enjoyed a game of mismatching sounds to animals -- doggie-meow, rooster - bow-wow, and the like. Chukovsky maintained that such verbal play occurs only after the child has mastered a skill or knowledge. Such play serves then to verify the child's knowledge of reality. The reverse juxtaposition of things becomes amusing when it serves to confirm what the child already knows to be the real order of things.

As director of an experimental nursery school for children from 14 to 36 months, Johnson (1928) had many first-hand opportunities to observe the verbal play behavior of children. She concluded that, "Children make ... language reactions which seem to be responses to language itself. They experiment with words they hear used, with their uses and meanings, with time relations ... with words indicating causal relationships, with number, with sentence structure, and with verb forms. These experiments are not really concerned with meaning, value, and use but with rhythm, with sound, and with form. "p. 114). Forgetting the communicative function of language while concentrating on its forms, the children would compose brief, repetitive chants:

munna, munna, mo
munna, munna, mo (p. 108)

Now it's done, un un
Done un un un (p. 109)

Weir (1962), a linguist, found many examples of verbal play in the pre-sleep monologues she taped of her 2½ year old son as he lay in his crib. Because of a strong resemblance between some of the recorded passages and the kind of pattern drill encountered in foreign language instruction, she believes that verbal play, while it is pleasurable, is so structured that it functions as a systematic exercise. The most frequent kind of play was with sound. Next in frequency were examples of play with grammatical patterns in which there was a high rate of substitution. This play with syntax was accomplished through the selection of a given grammatical pattern in which substitution occurred in one slot of the grammatical frame. The words substituted usually

belonged to the same form class or it was a pronoun. An example of noun substitution was:

What color
What color blanket
What color mop
What color glass (p. 109)

In this case a pronoun was substituted for a noun:

Stop it
Stop the ball
Stop it (p. 110)

Although technically monologues, Weir found that the recorded passages bore many of the characteristics of a dialogue in which the child functioned both as a student and teacher, becoming his own interlocutor, modeling responses, and correcting himself.

Coinciding with Piaget's concrete operational stage of cognitive development (the stage of games and rules), children begin to play verbal games. Verbal games are distinguished from verbal play in that they are characterized by the presence of rules which make them transmittable from one player to another. Pig Latin is an example of a verbal game. Iona and Peter Opie's (1959) study of the verbal games of children in Britain found in them a quite remarkable degree of continuity, uniformity, and persistence over time and space considering that they are comprised of a totally oral medium. That such games are capable of reaching a high level of elaboration and sophistication is demonstrated by the stylized verbal competition of some low-income black youths (Burling, 1973). "Toasts" are akin to long, epic poems which recount the pleasures and struggles of the people. They deal often with themes of violence and sex, and while they are known to women, toasts reside exclusively

within the male subculture. The most skillful toasters are grown men, but boys are inculcated into this activity by engaging in "sounding" or "the dozens" in which participants fling clever insults and witticisms back and forth. Begin with memorizing one-liners, the boys increase their repertory with age, adding new material and relying less on fixed formulas.

Play and language are interdependent entities. They occur together. For example, Luria (1959) and Smilansky (1968) found language and play behavior were correlated. Moreover, it has been proposed that play facilitates cognitive development (Singer, 1973; Kagan, 1971; Irwin, 1975). In a parallel manner, it has been speculated that verbal play -- play with language -- facilitates mastery over literacy. The unconscious command of language attributed to the preschool child by Vygotsky (1962) is sharpened through verbal play. This, in turn, may make it easier for the child to master consciously reading and writing once in school. The present investigation was undertaken to add to the current information on verbal play. Its purposes were the following:

a) To collect samples of spontaneous language of unselected children ages 6 months to 10 years;

b) to analyze the language samples for their developmental features; and

c) to observe the effect, if any, on the language of such variables as the presence of others, and the use of materials and equipment.

PROCEDURE

From September 1975 to May 1976 observers collected samples of the spontaneous language of unselected children from 6 months to 10 years of age. Samples of children from three years and older were drawn in school settings including day care centers, private nursery schools, and public school classes in New York City. Infants and toddlers were observed in their homes. The observers were trained to select language samples which evidenced verbal play or verbal games. Samples were first tape-recorded and then transcribed to a written data sheet. Each sample was coded to provide information on the child's age, sex, race, SES, presence of other persons, use of materials or equipment, activity being engaged in, and setting. Information on achievement in reading amd writing was drawn from school records and teacher feedback using a formal questionnaire. Out of a total of 300 language samples collected from 300 different children, 149 were selected for analysis on the basis of their clear evidence of verbal play or verbal games. A sample was deemed to be an example of verbal play if it incorporated an observable manipulation of the sound, semantics, and/or syntax of the language. A sample was considered an example of a verbal game if, in addition to a playful manipulation of the language forms, it involved some preconceived rules or guidelines which permitted one or more other children to participate in a relatively stable or consistent manner.

The analysis involved dividing the total example of 149 into three age categories; infant and toddler - under three years; preschool - 3 years to 4 years 11 months; and school age - 5 years and over. Within each age category frequency counts were made on each of the recorded variables: sex; race; SES; presence or absence of others; use or nonuse of materials or equipment; and for school age data, achievement level in reading and writing. Percentages were calculated on those variables where a noticeable difference was obtained in the frequency count. In addition to the quantitative analysis, the sample was scrutinized for specific qualities of verbal play such as evidence of sound play, kinds of syntactic play, and invented words.

RESULTS

The total sample of 149 was divided into age categories as follows:

Infant and toddler . . . 34

Preschool 74

School age 41

1. The quantitative analysis yielded the following findings:
   a) No evidence of verbal games occurred in either the infant and toddler or preschool samples;
   b) In 12 of the 15 samples of verbal games which appeared in the school age sample, other persons (children) were present in each of the 12 instances;
   c) In the same 12 out of 15 examples of verbal games which occurred in the school age group, no materials or equipment were in use;

d) An approximate ratio of 3 to 1 was obtained in the overall sample of sound to syntactical play;

e) No substantial differences were observed in the frequency counts on the variables of sex, race, SES, and achievement level;

f) The presence or absence of other persons revealed a measurable developmental trend across age categories in which there is an increase in the presence of other persons in the instances of verbal play and games as the children grow older:

PRESENCE OR ABSENCE OF OTHERS

	PRESENCE	ABSENCE
Infant and Toddler	44%	56%
Preschool	52%	48%
School Age	66%	34%

g) There is a similar trend for the use or nonuse of materials and equipment. The use of materials and equipment occurred more frequently in the instances of verbal play (but not verbal games) of older than of younger children:

USE OR NONUSE OF MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT

	USE	NONUSE
Infant and Toddler	51%	49%
Preschool	53.4%	46.5%
School Age	70.5%	29.4%

II The qualitative analysis revealed the following findings:

a) Play with Sound. Analysis of the data showed that most of the verbal play consisted of sound play -- a playful manipulation of the phonemic elements as well as the prosodic features of pitch, stress, and juncture. The recordings revealed a consistent pattern of sequences marked by a very regular beat or cadence:

Doobie doo
Doobie doo
Doobie doo (2 years)

La la la
Lol li pop
La la la
Lol li pop (6 years)

This regular rhythm is evident even in dialogues, as in the following in which the first child is 4 years old and the second is 10:

1st child	Where you goin?
2nd child	To the store.
1st child	Why you goin?
2nd child	To get milk.
1st child	How you goin?
2nd child	I'm walking.
1st child	When you goin?
2nd child	Right now.
1st child	When I'm goin?
2nd child	You're not going I can't take you.

Even samples drawn from infants (6-18 months) showed a manipulation of pitch, stress, and juncture in which an approximation of English pitch contour was evident:

Uh ooh
Uh ooh
Uh ooh
Uh ooh (6 months)

Boyna mana ma
Na na na na na (18 months)

As would be expected, the older the child, the more meaningful verbal elements were incorporated in the sound play. For example, contrast this sample from a 6 year old:

Ramona has a phona
Ramona has a phona
Mikey has a bikey
Mikey has a bikey

or this one from a 5 year old:

I'm gonna telly cause
You put jelly in my belly
And made me smelly

with this from a 2½ year old:

Oopu oopu ockie
Oopu oopu yockie
Oopu oopu ockie
Oopu oopu ockie

Other developmental trends in sound play that appeared with increasing age were higher incidences of consonants, polysyllabic words, and consonant clusters. Features of rhyme, alliteration, and symmetry were persistent throughout the age categories.

b) Play with Syntax. Although play with syntax occurred much less frequently in the sample, it was still very much in evidence. In almost every instance, including those where nonsense words comprised part of the sequence, the word order conformed to standard English pattern:

Mine mine mine
Fine fine fine
Mine doll
Mine ball (18 months)

You hungy, dogie, domy
You a hungy bungy (3 years)

Mac can do what?
Mac ca do - Mac ca do
Hey Sandra
What can Mac do
Mac can doo, doo, doo,
Mac can do you (6 years)

Watch the knicks
Beat the picks
Hear the ticks
Likety splits
Hickety lips (8 years)

Nouns comprised the predominant word class in all the samples, followed by verbs and then adjectives. In addition, there was greater conformity to English grammar with increasing age. Thus, samples drawn from older children more frequently showed correct inflectional endings than did those of younger children.

Predominant in syntactical play were the examples of metalingual practice. A particular grammatical pattern is repeated several times. In each instance the child substitutes from the same category of word form in one or more of the slots of the grammatical frame. These sequences

have about them the short and redundant quality of a linguistic pattern drill:

My eyes
My nose
My ears
My neck
My mouth (2½ years)

Uh oh spaghettios
Uh oh spaghettios
Uh oh french fries
Uh oh french fries (3½ years)

Put a tic tac in your mouth
Put a lic lac in your house
Put a zic zac in your fouse
Put a cric crac in your bouse (4½ years)

Hit it
Sit it
Pit it
Sit it
Frit it
Slit it
Mit it (5 years)

I got a car
I got a jar
I got a bar
I got a nar
I got a par (6 years)

c) Play with Meaning. Although there were no "topsy-turvies" of the kind Chukovsky (1963) described in the sample, there were 10 instances in which the child manipulated the meanings of words. In some cases, there was an overt reflection on this process:

San Diego, Sandiego, Sandi ego
San Diego, Sandi ego
Eggs aren't sandy! (4 years)

In other cases, the child invented a word to describe a particular phenomenon. For example, this child drew a picture consisting of many hearts. He asked the student teacher to label it as follows:

This is a very hearty story. (6½ years)

Other words were invented to describe an experience for which the child had not yet acquired an appropriate label. This dialogue occurred between two 6 year olds during a twenty-minute experience with floating and sinking objects:

1st child	This sponge is up I can make it sink I can make it sink up Here's a rock It won't sink up by itself
2nd child	Sink-up rock sink-up
Teacher	What did you discover?
2nd child	He is sinking-up the rock
1st child	It won't sink-up by itself

Up is affixed to the verb sink in lieu of the word float. Such concoctions reveal both a linguistic and a conceptual agility.

Another dialogue in which the first child is 7 and the second is 5 also incorporated an invented word. In this case the word clinks was used to describe a bicycle chain. Though the word is invented its correct inflected form (as in the case of sinking-up in the prior example) shows conformity to standard English grammar:

1st child	The clinks go around here
2nd child	Push this clink up
1st child	I'll fix this clink

Other invented words were obvious examples of analogical new formations, as in the case of the 6 year old who affixed the prefix -un to wet to describe what will happen to her doll after the bath. Having mastered the meaning of the negative prefix -un, the child now extrapolated to yet another instance in order to create the meaning not (or un-) wet.

Seven of the 10 examples of play with meaning were produced by children 5 years and over.

d) Verbal Games. As noted earlier, verbal games appeared only in the school age group. In addition, in all but one example they conformed to the kind of ritualized rhymes and chants which the Opies (1959) collected. In these cases there is minimal or no evidence of individual variation:

Johnny win the ocean
Johnny win the sea
Johnny broke a bottle
and blame it on me

Sister told mom
Mom told paw
Johnny win whipping and
Ha ha ha! (5 years)

Here are two variations on the same game:

Jingle bells
Batman smells
Robin laid an egg
The batmobile lost a wheel
The comitonger broked his leg (5 years)

Jingle bells
Batman smells
Robin laid an egg
The batmobile has lost its wheel
and the Riddler got away
Hey! (6½ years)

This is an example of the kind of verbal game some black youngsters may engage in preparatory to mastering more complex forms such as "The Dozens".

Give me five
On the black hand side
Put it in hold
Break the pole
Now you got soul (8 years)

Twelve out of the total of 15 verbal games recorded involved more than one child. Here's an example of a typical dialogue between two 8 year olds:

1st child Off my case, potato face

2nd child In your lip, potato chip
Up your nose with a rubber hose

1st child That don't rhyme, Frankenstein
I'm the boss, applesauce

Two instances involved tongue twisters with each child trying to repeat the phrase as quickly as possible three times in succesion: She sells seashells by the seashore.

Only one instance of an invented verbal game appeared in which the rules were explicated in advance:

If I say a name and later on
during the game you say it,
you're out. Like, if I say Alice
and then you say Alice, you're out. (10 years)

Such games are probably precursors to the more elaborate constructions such as invented vocabularies which occasionally appear in early adolescent age groups.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the absence of randomization limits the generalizability of these data, certain conclusions may be drawn.

First, the high degree of concordance between these results and those of the earlier study by Weir (1962) supports these conclusions:

a) Most verbal play consists of play with sound followed by play with syntax;

b) Play with syntax consists primarily of highly repetitive drill-like sequences with substitution of a particular form class within a given grammatical frame;

c) Word order within the verbal play consistently conforms to standard English patterns;

d) Examples of verbal play are marked by a regularity of rhythm with frequent use of rhyme and alliteration. They are often highly symmetrical structures, as well, beginning and ending, rondo-like, in a similar form.

Second, a study by Shields and Steiner (1973) of the language of English preschoolers found that the presence of other persons could facilitate the children's language production. This is consistent with the finding that

e) The presence of other persons plays an important role in the verbal play of children, one of increasing importance as children grow older.

Third, other conclusions, while tentative, conform to what we know from pragmatic experience of young children's verbal behavior;

f) With increasing age verbal games tend to replace verbal play;

g) With increasing age, materials and equipment may be more frequently incorporated into verbal play.

Despite the limitations of the available data on verbal play, the apparent ubiquity of this species - specific variety of play behavior cannot help but make one conjecture on its role as a significant developmental activity in language acquisition. It merits continued investigation.

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